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ABSTRACT

In 1993 teachers in the Virginia Beach (Virginia) public schools asked parents what they think about classroom practices as part of a client satisfaction project. A questionnaire called the Parent Perception Survey was mailed to more than 40,000 homes to ask about parent satisfaction with the teaching their children were receiving. A teacher task force developed the survey, arriving at a 75-item questionnaire dealing with classroom environment, discipline, homework, grading, instruction, and communication. Field testing resulted in 56 items, divided between two survey forms. Parents of students of 1,610 teachers agreed to participate (40,128 forms were sent out). Better than 50% of the parents returned completed forms. Each participating teacher received a confidential summary of responses from his or her own class as well as an overall look at the grand mean of responses. In general, parents appreciate and value the efforts teachers in Virginia Beach put forth, and they fully support the idea of client satisfaction for the public schools. A refined instrument is being developed for future surveys. Six tables present study data. (SLD)

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A REPORT ON THE VIRGINIA BEACH PARENT PERCEPTION SURVEY

Sidney L. Faucette, *Superintendent*
Virginia Beach City Public Schools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"I believe this survey is an excellent idea. It has made me feel more involved (and has given) me an opportunity to speak out on what goes on in my child's classroom. I think the administration and the teachers deserve a round of applause for taking such a bold step."

Parent of an Elementary School Student

In 1993 teachers in Virginia Beach City Public Schools launched a national first—they asked parents what they think about classroom practices, as part of a client satisfaction project. Questionnaires called the *Parent Perception Survey*© were mailed to more than 40,000 homes to ask "How am I doing, teaching your child?" This survey was one of our efforts to increase parent involvement, gauge customer satisfaction, and guarantee continuous improvement, as we restructure our schools.

Recently in Virginia Beach, we've focused on the concept of parents as customers. About 10 percent of the schoolage children in this city attend private schools. Their parents have made the decision to get educational services from other providers. These potential customers (of ours) have spoken, and I'm worried about the message. They could be among our greatest supporters in the struggle to achieve academic excellence for all, to build schools, to reduce class size, and to improve the image of educators.

And what of the parents who send their children to our schools? They are indeed our valued customers, the people we serve daily. I believe it's essential that each and every one of them have an opportunity to tell us what we're doing well and where we can improve. The *Parent Perception Survey*© provided one such opportunity, and we are taking their responses very seriously.

"This survey is a very good idea because it helps both the child and the parent to sit down and discuss likes and dislikes about the teacher and what she is teaching. I hope it helps the teacher improve. Keep up the good work!"

Parent of a Middle School Student

CHANGING PATTERNS OF COMMUNICATION

Parents and teachers usually communicate—when there's a problem. Teachers often make a genuine effort to inform parents about good things that happen at school, but it's most often poor grades or poor behavior that causes a phone call or note to go to mom and dad, particularly in our middle and high schools. And it's indeed unusual for a parent to call a teacher just to say thank you or to pay a compliment.

The purpose of our client satisfaction project is to open communications between parents and teachers. We want our customers to know that we desire and value their input into the educational process. Then, we think, they will become more involved in our schools and more supportive of their child's learning at home and at school.

This increased participation will help parents to better understand the teacher's job. And, when teachers know that parents are willing to get more involved, I believe they will work even harder to gain their customer's stamp of approval. This should enhance the cooperative efforts between teachers and their clients much more than crisis communication.

SEEKING INPUT FROM CUSTOMERS

Clearly, the student is the primary recipient of the teaching–learning process. At the same time, teachers serve many clients, including students, parents, principals, college professors, and employers. For this project, however, we targeted parents as the *client* for several reasons. Most important, they are the decision makers concerning their children's education. Parents choose the school district, they choose the school zone within the district, and they pay the bills. Furthermore, a solid body of research at Johns Hopkins University and elsewhere, plus everybody's common sense, confirms the importance of the parents' role in students' academic success.

"I had my son help me, so this is as much a student evaluation as that of a parent. It did encourage discussion that was meaningful. It also motivates parental involvement."

Parent of a High School Student

DEVELOPING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

In July 1992, I appointed a task force of 30 teachers to develop a client satisfaction plan. I wanted to assure teacher ownership for the project. The intent was not for parents to evaluate teaching or to do performance appraisals of the teacher, but simply to let the teacher know their satisfaction with classroom practices.

When the task force met, their first discussions centered on the issue of *knowledge versus perception*. In general, they agreed that parents may have very little direct knowledge about what happens in their child's classroom, yet they do have opinions and perceptions about what goes on. The task force decided to find out about these perceptions.

To begin constructing the questionnaire, they reviewed research and added their own practical experience. Then they compiled a list of important elements of good teaching. Next they selected 75 specific items and agreed to structure responses in the format of:

- Strongly Agree ..... SA
- Agree ..... A
- Disagree ..... D
- Strongly Disagree ..... SD
- No Answer ..... N

The items dealt with the classroom environment, discipline, homework, grading, instruction, and communication. The directions instructed parents to mark *No Answer*, if for any reason they could not respond to an item.

"I would like to thank you for the opportunity to participate in this survey. I wish all parents could participate as well as all teachers. I know it would help the parents to express concerns, raise issues, and give praise without worrying about repercussions. The teacher may find out some things that he was not aware of."

Parent of an Elementary School Student

TRYING OUT THE SAMPLE ITEMS

Next, we tried out these items with a sample of parents. This sample also rated each item on its *importance* in the educational experience of a child. Parents of students from all grade levels were included in the sample.

The results were returned to the teacher task force, who used the responses to alter, delete, or add items. They ended up with 56 items, which were divided between two survey forms (*Parent Perception Survey©*, Form A and Form B) for field testing during the 1992-93 school year. See sample items in Table 1. Both Form A and Form B included write-in areas for the parents to make comments.

TABLE 1: Sample Items on the *Parent Perception Survey©*

My child's teacher:					
1. Challenges my child	SA	A	D	SD	N
2. Makes me feel comfortable contacting him/her	SA	A	D	SD	N
3. Recognizes positive behaviors	SA	A	D	SD	N
4. Explains the homework assignment	SA	A	D	SD	N
5. Creates a safe classroom environment	SA	A	D	SD	N

FORMULATING GUIDELINES

A second job for the task force was to formulate guidelines for use of the feedback collected by the survey. They decided on these:

(1) teacher participation in the client satisfaction plan would be voluntary;

(2) the surveys would be scored and the results tabulated and analyzed by an agency outside the school system; and

(3) a confidential summary of the results would be returned directly to individual teachers to use as they thought best.

The next step was teacher recruitment. In September 1992, all teachers in the school district were invited to volunteer for the field test. By February 1993, 1,610 classroom teachers (46 percent of the teaching force) had volunteered to participate.

Then the task force determined which parents would receive questionnaires. Here's how parents were selected:

(1) For elementary teachers, the parents of all assigned students were surveyed.

(2) For elementary resource teachers (for example, art, physical education, reading), a sample of parents of students at a selected grade level were surveyed.

(3) For special education teachers (not self-contained), a sample of parents of students from the teacher's roster were surveyed.

(4) In middle and senior high schools, one class period (2nd bell) was selected, and only the parents of students assigned to that class were surveyed.

Modifications were made in these guidelines, as necessary, to ensure that each participating teacher had a survey population of at least 25 parents whenever possible.

"I wish I had this survey for all my children's teachers. I definitely have strong opinions on the teachers I do know about and would like the opportunity to let you know how much I appreciate their dedication to my children."

Parent of a Middle School Student

SENDING OUT THE QUESTIONNAIRES

On April 20, we mailed a total of 40,128 survey forms directly to parents. The name of the teacher, the school, and the grade level or subject were printed on each form. Half the schools in the district used Form A; half, Form B; but all teachers within a building used the same form. Upon completion, the parent returned the form to the scoring agency in a pre-addressed, stamped envelope that was provided. These forms were unsigned to assure anonymity.

Better than 50 percent of the parents returned completed forms. For elementary teachers, the return rate was higher than for middle or senior high school teachers. Also, regular classroom teachers received more returns than resource teachers. Approximately 10 percent of the questionnaires were sent to the wrong address or to the wrong parent, thus letting us know about errors in our new student database.

REPORTING THE RESULTS TO INDIVIDUAL TEACHERS

A confidential summary of the responses was delivered to each participating teacher on June 17, 1993. Each summary report included the number and percentage of responses in each of five categories: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, and No Answer.* The values in the *Missing* column indicate the number of parents who left each item blank. A hypothetical example of the summary information is provided in Table 2, to give an idea of how the results for any one teacher might look.

REPORTING THE RESULTS TO INDIVIDUAL TEACHERS *(continued)*

"This survey demonstrates true initiative on the part of the Virginia Beach School Board. I appreciate your increased welcome of parental input and participation."

Parent of a High School Student

(continued)

Looking at the "Mean" column in Table 2, you see Jane Doe's rating for each item on the questionnaire. The figures in this column were calculated as follows: responses under *Strongly Agree* were assigned a value of 4, those under *Agree* a value of 3, those under *Disagree* a value of 2, and those under *Strongly Disagree* a value of 1. A *mean* is simply the average of these values, thus the *Mean* could range from a high of 4 (if all responses were *Strongly Agree*) to a low of 1 (if all responses were *Strongly Disagree*).

The value at the bottom of Table 2 labeled *Grand Mean* is the average of all the individual item *Means*. It is this number that indicates the overall parent perception of teacher Jane Doe.

"Thanks for the chance to give some feedback to the teachers. Sometimes we parents feel left out of things. I'm grateful to have my opinion heard."

Parent of an Elementary School Student

TABLE 2: Example of the Report Provided for Each Teacher

Summary Report

Teacher: Jane Doe ***School:*** Virginia Beach Elementary School
Grade/Subject: Grade 4

Item	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Mean	No Answer		Missing	
#	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		N	%	N	%
1	17	77	4	18	1	5	0	0	3.7	2	8	1	4
2	23	96	1	4	0	0	0	0	4.0	1	4	0	0
3	12	57	6	29	1	5	2	10	3.3	2	8	2	8
4	18	86	1	5	1	5	1	5	3.7	3	12	1	4
•													
•													
•													
28	12	55	10	45	0	0	0	0	3.5	0	0	3	12
29	6	24	9	36	5	20	5	20	2.6	0	0	0	0
30	25	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	4.0	0	0	0	0
31	8	38	7	33	4	19	2	10	3.0	4	16	0	0

Number of Surveys Returned: 25

Grand Mean:3.5

CALCULATING THE OVERALL GRAND MEAN

An overall **Grand Mean** was also calculated by averaging all the individual teacher means, and the results were very positive for our teachers. The overall *Grand Mean* for all participants (based on the 4.0 scale) was 3.4 on both Form A and Form B. A breakdown of the data by school level appears in Table 3.

TABLE 3: Grand Means by Category

School Level	*Form A*	*Form B*
Elementary Teachers	3.4	3.5
Middle School Teachers	3.2	3.3
High School Teachers	3.2	3.3
All Teachers	3.4	3.4

ANALYZING THE COMMENTS

Spaces were included on the surveys for parents to express their opinions about the survey or to make comments about the teacher. All comments about any one teacher were returned to that teacher.

Comments about the teachers were extremely positive. The comments were divided into three categories:

- *Positive* (for example, *this is an excellent teacher, this teacher is a true professional*),
- *Constructive* (for example, *class size is too big, more communication is needed*), and
- *Negative* (for example, *explanations given are inadequate, this teacher does not return my phone calls*).

A summary of the categories of comments about teachers appears in Table 4.

TABLE 4: Summary of Comments About the Teacher

	Elementary Schools	*Middle Schools*	*High Schools*
Positive	77.5%	67.1%	64.5%
Constructive	7.0%	10.4%	12.0%
Negative	16.0%	22.5%	23.0%

"I believe this is a good idea because we (parents) should have a voice in how our children are being taught in school. I think if parents get more involved with their child and with the school, that child might become more interested and be a better student."

Parent of a Middle School Student

Comments about the project were overwhelmingly positive. These comments were also divided into three categories:

- *Positive* (for example, *thank you for asking my opinion, I hope you continue to do this*),
- *Constructive* (for example, *clarify the question about communication, these questions are hard to answer without being in the classroom*), and
- *Negative* (for example, *this was a waste of time and money, parents will not be objective and shouldn't be asked*).

A summary of the categories of comments about the survey appears in Table 5.

TABLE 5: Summary of Comments About the Client Satisfaction Project

	Elementary Schools	*Middle Schools*	*High Schools*
Positive	48.5%	50.5%	41.8%
Constructive	47.0%	43.0%	51.0%
Negative	4.0%	6.5%	7.2%

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS ABOUT CLIENT SATISFACTION

On the basis of the numerical results and the written comments from the field test data, we offer these conclusions:

(1) In general, parents appreciate and value the efforts Virginia Beach teachers put forth on behalf of their children.

(2) Parents in Virginia Beach fully support the idea of client satisfaction for public schools.

However, both of these conclusions need to be viewed in light of the fact that all of our teachers did not volunteer to participate in the field test of the survey questions this year. Therefore, many of our customers did not have an opportunity to express their opinions or to share their perceptions. Still, these results would seem to support our conclusions.

"I admire all teachers who decided to take part in this survey."

Parent of a Middle School Student

INTERPRETING RESULTS WITH TEACHERS

During July participating teachers were invited to a meeting to discuss survey results. At that meeting, project consultants offered suggestions for interpreting the individual summary reports (represented by Table 2), and teachers shared their feelings about the experience of participating in this project.

We found that a few teachers overreacted to even a single negative comment, even when the majority of comments about them were very positive. It may be that our teachers need to learn how to constructively respond to negative feedback.

In addition, a group of teachers are looking at the results to see whether we need any special type of staff development for our employees based on the results of our field test. They will be considering workshops on conferencing techniques, strategies for improved communication, and additional procedures for informing parents about school activities.

REFINING THE INSTRUMENT

The data from the field test of the two questionnaires were used by the teacher task force to select the items to be used on the questionnaire we'll use this year. Three sources of information were used in this process.

(1) The teachers first looked at the percentage of parents who marked *No Answer* and the percentage of parents who left an item blank. Those items that went unanswered or appeared difficult for a large number of parents to answer were either deleted or modified.

(2) Next, Coefficient Alphas (a statistical index of reliability) were computed for each item. Items that added little to the overall reliability of the survey were either deleted or altered. (*Reliability* refers to the property of an item to elicit consistent responses time after time.)

(continued)

"We took pleasure in completing this survey. We have never been asked in previous years or in other school districts about what we thought about the teacher. We'd like you to know we are very impressed with Ms. X (teacher) and with this project."

■

Parent of an Elementary School Student

REFINING THE INSTRUMENT *(continued)*

(3) Additionally, a randomly selected group of parents (n=50) participated in a test-retest reliability study. These parents completed Form A or Form B; then the same parents were asked to fill out an identical form seven days later. The results from the administration of the two forms were compared item by item. Items that elicited widely disparate responses (achieved low correlations of reliability) were then either deleted or modified.

These steps produced a list of 27 potential items to be included on a final version of the *Parent Perception Survey©* for use in 1993-94. This should produce a reliable and valid instrument for assessing the perceptions of parents. However, the instrument and the client satisfaction plan will be reviewed annually by teachers and modified as needed.

OTHER CUSTOMER SERVICE INITIATIVES

Teachers are not the only ones finding out about customer satisfaction. Principals, assistant principals, librarians, and counselors asked their clients — classroom teachers — for their perceptions. All groups received high marks. A summary of results appears in Table 6.

"I hope that this helps the teacher in a positive manner. Teachers deserve more for the difficult job they encounter in today's classrooms."

Parent of a High School Student

TABLE 6: Grand Means for Other Client Satisfaction Projects

	Percent Participating	*Elementary Schools*	*Middle Schools*	*High Schools*
Principals	100%	3.3	3.3	3.4
Assistant Principals	89%	3.4	3.4	3.3
Counselors	64%	3.5	3.5	3.5
Librarians	63%	3.5	3.5	3.5

"I had more "No Answers" than I would have expected, and that concerns me. I guess it says something about communication on many levels — between parent and child as well as between parent and teacher. I hope to know more about the teacher next year." ■

Parent of a Middle School Student

COMMUNITY SUPPORT THROUGH CUSTOMER SERVICE

The client satisfaction project is a valuable effort for our school district. The survey results will help teachers to understand the perceptions parents hold about what happens in their child's classroom and to encourage more and improved interactions between parents and teachers. Teachers also can take pride in the effects of this project on their professional image.

Additionally, through annual use of the *Parent Perception Survey©*, I believe that parents will be prompted to become more informed about teachers and about classroom activities and teachers will become more sensitive to the concerns of parents.

We're going to continue to emphasize client satisfaction in Virginia Beach. After all, customer service attributes sound like givens for any service organization, in or out of education. Think about these ideas: courtesy, integrity, reliability, helpfullness, efficiency, availability, friendliness, and professionalism. Wouldn't you be offended if someone even hinted at the absence of one of these in your dealings with the business world? Surely, then, we should pride ourselves on providing these old-fashioned public service hallmarks for the school's customers.

"This is a great idea. In the past there has been no way to express a parent's level of satisfaction with a particular teacher within this very large system. I feel this is a start toward public school system's being more responsive to the needs of children and parents. Thank you!"

■

Parent of an Elementary School Student

LOOKING AHEAD

Now we're looking ahead in Virginia Beach. Forty-six percent of our teachers have shown they fee! responsible for customer satisfaction and they want to know if they're providing it successfully. They're motto is "I want to know! Do you?" They've paved the way for the rest of our teachers to join them.

Likewise, thousands of our parents have demonstrated that they like being asked if they're satisfied with classroom practices and they like what we're doing for their children. They've paved the way for other parents to join them.

I invite every Virginia Beach teacher to participate in the client satisfaction project this year, to help me send out the message that we have nothing to fear and nothing to hide. I expect all of our teachers to *want to know* parents' perceptions about what goes on in classrooms.

Those perceptions are going to be there whether or not we ask about them. Why not find out what the perceptions are? In this way we will ensure continuous improvement, we can build more trust between parents and teachers, and we can make progress toward ensuring academic success for all our students.

For more information or additional copies of this report, call Laura Ostrander at (804) 427-4776 or write her at the Educational Planning Center, P.O. Box 6038, Virginia Beach, VA 23456. Price $3.00.

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